

CENTRE FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES IN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

# THE FLICKERING TORCH:

## Blackouts and Phatic Communication in Tanzania

**Michael Degani**

Johns Hopkins University

**Friday, September 20, 2019**

**3:00 - 5:00 p.m.**

**Room H-1120**

Henri F. Hall Building

1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. W.

This talk examines electricity cuts in the megacity of Dar es Salaam as a social drama of Tanzanian nationalism. Every few years, the national power utility Tanesco cycles the city through exceptionally lean periods of generation, when outages spike with a frequency, duration and distribution that demands explanation. Drawing on the concept of phatic communication — messages that reference channels — as well as psychoanalytic work on the relation between language, lack and authority, this talk shows how Tanesco's announcements of rationing allowed urban dwellers to experience power cuts as a shared and thus meaningful burden in ways that resonated with a socialist history of collective sacrifice. However, such announcements were not always felicitous. Irregular or unexplained cuts during rationing periods threatened the fragile paradox of connection through absence. They gave rise to wild rumours and conspiracy theories as to the source of the outages, staging, by contrast, a rending of the compact between citizen and state.

This event is free and open to the public.  
The space is wheelchair accessible.

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**Michael Degani** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, broadly focusing on energy use and infrastructure in African cities.